MEDIÁLNÍ STUDIA

MEDIA STUDIES

TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS AND TEACHER SELF-DISCLOSURE ON SOCIAL MEDIA: ESTONIAN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Nine focus group interviews with Estonian primary - (N= 25) and secondary school (N=20) students who had "friended" their teachers on social media, were carried out to study their experiences with teacher-student interactions on social media. We aimed to explore how teachers' self-disclosure on social media affected teacher credibility and professionalism in the eyes of the students and the impact the students believed social media interactions had on the overall teacher-student relations.

Our findings indicate that although teacher-student interactions on social media were mainly school-related, students had also become accustomed to lurking on teachers' social media profiles to gain additional information about their private life. Students in our sample had rather positive views about teachers who somewhat disclosed their personal lives on social media and believed that interacting with one's teachers on social media would also lead to more enjoyable and relaxed teacher-student relations in the school context.

Keywords: Teacher-student interaction ▪ social media ▪ self-disclosure ▪ teacher credibility ▪ school ▪ Estonia

1.   INTRODUCTION

In the area of "public surveillance" (Nissenbaum, 2004) and due to the "context collapse" (Marwick & boyd, 2010) in networked publics, students and teachers have gained access to each other's information, which previously was considered private. In fact, as suggested by Fox and Bird (2015, p. 22) "an unspoken tension has emerged between whether, how, when and with whom to engage using social media and on what basis these connections and interactions are being made – whether as an individual (personally) or as a teacher (professionally)." Asterhan and Rosenberg (2015)

even argue that teacher-student interactions on social media have helped to blur different boundaries and (un)written rules about student-teacher relationships, for example in the context of privacy-publicity, authority-friendship, and availability-responsibility. The blurring of such boundaries has not only led to various professional, ethical, and legal dilemmas amongst teachers (Russo, Squelch, & Varnham, 2010), but has also triggered questions about teacher credibility (Wang et al., 2015; Coffelt, Strayhorn & Tillson, 2014; Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2009).

Credibility, however, is crucial as teachers play a unique role in shaping the minds of students and are "expected to act as role model citizens and educators" (Wang et al. 2015, p. 8). Furthermore, previous research suggests that teachers are usually held to higher standards of professionalism, as "uprightness of character" (Lumpkin, 2008, p. 46) is expected of them even when they are not teaching (Foulger et al., 2009). At the same time, there is no unanimous agreement about what appropriate or inappropriate teacher conduct is, especially outside of the classroom (Estrada, 2010). In fact, as argued by Wang et al. (2015), the term "professionalism" is ambiguous and open to individual interpretations in relation to interactions outside of school hours.

Gaining information about students' experiences and opinions about teacher-student interactions and friendships on social media is thus particularly important. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to explore how teachers' self-disclosure on social media affected teacher credibility and professionalism in the eyes of the students. Furthermore, we aimed to study the impact the students believed such social media interactions had on the overall teacher-student relations.

Previous research (e.g. Cayanus & Martin, 2004; Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2009) has documented the importance of self-disclosure in teacher-student relationships both in the classroom setting, as well as in social media (cf. Froment, Garcia Gonzalez & Bohorquez, 2017; and Camas Garrido, Valero Moya & Vendrell Morancho, 2021 for systematic review). However, most of the research on teacher-student interactions on social media has studied teachers' perceptions and experiences on the topic (Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, 2014; Sumuer, Esfer & Soner Yildirm, 2014; Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2018; Keasberry, 2018), while students' views have been less often explored (Hershkovitz & Forkosh-Baruch, 2017; Hershkovitz & Baruch, 2013).

In Estonia, where the current study is carried out, there has been no public discussions about teacher-student interactions on social media, nor have schools developed any guidelines or recommendations to guide teachers' social media behaviour. At the same time, previous research (Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, Räim & Siibak, 2014) has indicated that Estonian teachers value their privacy highly and try not to disclose information on social media that could reveal aspects of their private lives, e.g. information about their families and relationships. Estonian teachers' self-assessment suggests that they have developed a good sense of audience-awareness literacy (Murumaa-Mengel, 2017) and they are well aware of the potential of having students and other "nightmare readers" (Marwick & boyd, 2010) i.e. members of the

audience that the information disclosed on social media is not originally meant for, lurking on their profiles. However, we lack information about students' views and opinions on the topic.

Thus, in spring 2018, in order to provide the students with an opportunity to share their experiences about teacher-student interactions on social media and to voice their opinions about its potential impact on teacher credibility, professionalism, and teacher-student relations in general, we conducted nine focus group interviews with primary-, (N=25) and secondary school students (N=20). We set out to find answers to the following research questions: 1) What are the main motivations and reasons for teacher-student "friendships" on social media?; and 2) What kind of role do the students envision such online self-disclosure to have on teacher credibility, professionalism, and teacher-student relations?

2.   THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1.   Teacher-student "friendships" and interactions on social media

Although many teachers use social media for school-related and teaching purposes (e.g. Asterhan & Rosenberg, 2015; Asterhan et al., 2013), most of them use social media not as a professional outlet but rather so as to build and to maintain personal social networks (Räim & Siibak, 2014; Sheldon, 2015; Fox & Bird, 2015). In fact, there is still no consensus among scholars as to whether teachers and students should even be able to "friend" each other on social media (Acar, 2013). For instance, in some countries, such as Israel (Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2018), or in some states and school districts in the US (di Marzo, 2012), teacher-student interactions on social media have been banned. At the same time, findings by Asterhan and Rosenberg (2015) suggest that many teachers see real value in establishing connections with their students on social media. For example, despite the official ban, 59 percent of the Israeli teachers (N=178) reported having past or current interactions with their students on Facebook (ibid., p. 8).

The findings by Frokosh-Baruch, Hershkovitz and Ang (2015) indicate that teachers who are willing to connect with their students on social media tend to be younger, with less teaching experience and longer Facebook usage experience in comparison to those who are unwilling to interact with their students on social media. Furthermore, Frokosh-Baruch, Hershkovitz & Ang (2015, p. 282) claim that Facebook-mediated communication might serve as another platform to support students' "relationships with teachers with whom they already have good relationships". Studies with Estonian teachers (Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, 2014) also reveal that teachers are more likely to accept friend requests from students they know personally (i.e. have taught or co-organised some events with) rather than students who just happen to attend the same school. In the latter case, teachers are more likely to ignore such friend requests (*ibid*). The initiation of such teacher-student "friendships" on social media

should still mainly come from the students, while teachers sending "friend" requests to their students is considered inappropriate (cf. Techlehaimanot & Hickman, 2011).

In fact, teachers are often concerned about the blurring of boundaries between their personal and professional lives, especially when interacting with their students on social media (Asterhan et al, 2013; Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, 2014). According to Asterhan et al. (2013, p. 3), teachers tend to have three kinds of concerns: 1) boundaries of privacy, i.e. concerns about students gaining access to teachers' private lives, and teacher's gaining access to unwanted aspects of students' private lives and the responsibility this might trigger; 2) boundaries of authority vs. intimacy, i.e. on the one hand, becoming "friends" with students on social media enables teachers to establish closer and friendlier relationships with their students but, on the other hand, the students might interpret the notions of "friendship" in the social media context; and 3) boundaries between personal and professional leisure, i.e. teachers can offer their help and be more easily available to students on social media, however such availability again starts to invade private life and leisure time.

Such blurring of boundaries as described above is also one of the reasons why various social media policies and guidelines for teachers "strongly advise against the use of blended personal and professional accounts" (Graham et al., 2018, p. 37) and encourage teachers to create professional social media accounts. Although "friending" students through a separate "teacher profile" and communicating with students in closed discussion groups have been encouraged as potential ways to interact on social media (Frokosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2018; Asterhan & Rosenberg, 2015; Räim & Siibak, 2014; Asterhan et al., 2013), "friending" students through a personal account has remained one of the most popular means of teacher-student interactions on social media. For instance, 74 percent of the teachers in the Asterhan and Rosenberg (2015, p. 8) sample (N=178) had experience with this type of communication format.

The main reason why students interact with their teachers on social media in the first place is pragmatic: social media platforms enable students to ask school-related questions e.g. about schedules, dates of exams or assignments, or about class content (Draskovic et al., 2013; Gunnulfsen, 2016) more easily. Teachers, however, primarily contact their students on social media for issues related to logistics and class organisation but also tend to intervene on social media when they notice students' psycho-social problems (Asterhan & Rosenberg, 2015), and offer emotional support (Ophir et al., 2016). In general, there is consensus amongst scholars who argue that teacher-student interactions on social media should be professional and mainly focused on issues related to school (Hart & Steinbrecher, 2011).

2.2.   Teachers' self-disclosure on social media

Sheldon, (2009) suggests that a moderate amount of self-disclosure on social media is crucial for relationship development between online friends, as by disclosing

information on social media "users not only find other individuals socially more attractive, but they can predict their attitudes, values, and beliefs". Thus, in the context of teacher-student interactions, research suggests that both the nature and amount of self-disclosure are critical factors and are relevant not only to class behaviour but also in teacher-student relationships on social media (Begovic, 2011).

Many countries (e.g. Australia, Scotland, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, etc.) have published various policies and guidebooks with the aim of providing guidance to teachers on how to interact with their students on social media and how to preserve their privacy when doing so (Graham et al., 2018). For example, "Social Media Policy" (2018) launched in Australia, states that even in the case of personal social media use, teachers "should not post about their work, colleagues, students or official information for work-related purposes" (p. 6) and the profile images of teachers should "reflect role specific-appropriate clothing" (p. 13).

Such guidelines have appeared to be necessary as there have been cases, e.g. in the USA, where teachers have been suspended or even fired for their posts on their personal profiles (Carter, Foulger, & Ewbank, 2008). In such cases, the teachers have had misperceptions about the size of their social media audience and have forgotten the potential "nightmare readers" (Marwick & boyd, 2010) lurking on their profiles. Problems have occurred mainly when teachers have posted "lurid comments or photographs involving sex or alcohol on social media sites" or had inappropriate contact with students (Akiti 2012, p. 124). For example, an analysis of the social media accounts of 153 pre-service teachers revealed that more than half of them had uploaded controversial or potentially controversial material to their accounts (Olson, Clough & Penning, 2009). In the eyes of the students, for example, teachers' comments about piercing or tattoos, photos about alcohol consumption, negative comments about colleagues, and comments of a political, racial, or religious nature are found to be highly inappropriate to post on social media (Nemetz, 2012). Furthermore, it is important to note that the more accepting the students were about teachers using Facebook in general, the less they considered teacher self-disclosure on social media to be problematic (Wang et al., 2015).

Teachers themselves considered mocking and harassing students, using unauthorised information, sharing false and disruptive information, creating fake profiles, and insulting national values to be the most inappropriate teacher behaviours on social media (Deveci & Kolburan, 2015). In short, four main categories have been identified as related to teachers' problematic social media use: 1) making statements that reflect poorly on their professional judgement, 2) revealing reckless or illegal activities, 3) giving inappropriate attention to students, and 4) documenting activities that, though legal, are imprudent and set a questionable example for students (Warnick et al., 2016).

All the above suggests that teachers need to manage their privacy boundaries (Petronio, 2002) carefully when interacting with students on social media and disclosing information about themselves, as finding a healthy balance between

representing themselves as teachers and as human beings with personal lives out-side their workplaces is important (Atay, 2009). Furthermore, teachers should not only strategically evaluate what kind of information they disclose on social media to preserve their credibility in the eyes of their students, but their self-disclosure on social media should also be consistent with their teaching style in the classroom (Mazer et al., 2007).

2.3.   Student-teacher relations and teacher credibility

Teacher-student relationships play an important role in changing the child's educa-tional path (e.g. Baker, 2006), as strong teacher-student relationships may positively impact a child's academic and social outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Beutel, 2010). In fact, students often name their favourite teachers as some of the most important adults in their lives besides their parents (Beutel, 2010).

One of the most important variables affecting teacher-student relationships is teacher credibility (see Finn et al., 2009 for a meta-analysis of the literature), which is defined as a combination of teacher competence, trustworthiness and caring for students (Teven & McCroskey, 1997). In fact, Killian (2017) suggests that when stu-dents find their teachers credible, they are more likely to be successful in school. As perceived teacher credibility can be positively or negatively affected by many behav-iours or personality traits of teachers, it is also closely connected with aspects of teacher self-disclosure.

The importance of self-disclosure and open communication in teacher-student relationships has been explored by many (cf. Cayanus, Martin 2004; Dobransky, Fry-mier, 2004). In this context, self-disclosure is defined as "statements in the class-room about the self that may or may not be related to subject content but reveal information about the teacher that students are unlikely to learn from other sources" (Sorensen, 1989, p. 260). In short, teacher self-disclosure suggests a personal invest-ment in teacher-student interaction and helps to reduce the distance in such rela-tions (Cayanus, Martin & Goodboy, 2009).

Although each teacher makes a personal decision as to what kind of informa-tion about oneself to disclose, this decision is still guided by social expectations of appropriate self-disclosure (Wang et al., 2015). Overall, scholars agree that most teachers are aware of what kind of information about themselves to disclose to their students (Fusani, 1994; Zhang et al., 2009). For example, sharing information about one's family (Zhang et al., 2009), telling stories and revealing personal beliefs (Nuss-baum et al., 1987), or using humour and showing enthusiasm while teaching are not only considered to be appropriate means of self-disclosure, but have also proven to be effective ways for increasing students' enjoyment of learning (Sorensen, 1989), and leading to positive evaluations by students (Nussbaum et al., 1987). In fact, stu-dents expect their teachers to reveal positive information about themselves (Soren-son, 1989). Inappropriate self-disclosure, however, e.g. information about intimate

family problems or alcohol consumption (Hosek & Thompson, 2009), or revealing one's political or religious beliefs (Rahimi & Bigdeli, 2016), could lead to negative student outcomes and negative teacher evaluations (Coffelt, Strayhorn & Tillson, 2014). Hosek and Thompson (2009) identified three main types of risks, i.e. role, face and stigma risks, that teachers perceived when disclosing information about themselves. In the case of role risks, the teachers tried not to reveal personal information that might jeopardise their professional standing, e.g. information that might threaten their teacher credibility or lead to sanctions by their school. In the context of face risks, the teacher tried to avoid revealing information that would cause embarrassment or discomfort in their students, or in their personal network, e.g. in their families. In fear of stigma risks, teachers tried not to disclose information that would have negative consequences on their identities (*ibid*).

Teachers usually have a good understanding of the expected behaviours they must adhere to maintain professionalism in the classroom (Hosek & Thompson, 2009). However, when teacher-student interaction moves beyond the classroom, e.g. to social media platforms, professional boundaries are more easily blurred (Hosek & Thompson, 2009; Wang et al., 2015). In fact, Mazer, Murphy and Simonds (2009) propose that teacher credibility can be jeopardised by teachers' social media practices, especially when their online content creation and behaviour are inconsistent with students' expectations.

As empirical research about students' views on the topic is still lacking, we wanted to contribute to the existing scholarship by exploring the opinions primary and secondary school students who all interacted with their teachers on social media had on the topic. We set out to answer the following research questions: 1) Why do the students interact with their teachers on social media?; and 2) What kind of role do the students envision teachers' social media self-disclosure has on teacher credibility, professionalism, and teacher-student relations in general?

3.   METHOD AND DATA

3.1.   Method

Since the purpose of our research was to explore personal experiences of the participants, we decided to carry out a qualitative study with the help of the focus group method. We believed the interaction between the participants and hence the opportunity to gain valuable input would provide us with interesting and rich data that we would not be able to gather through any other means. Furthermore, the focus group method also enabled us to explore similarities and differences in the views of the participants (Lobe, et al., 2008). At the same time, we were aware of the main challenges related to the method, e.g. establishing trust between the moderator and the participants might take time, the participants might find it hard to concentrate

on the topic, etc. (Lobe, et al., 2008). Regardless of the potential limitations, we considered the method to be most suitable for finding answers to the research questions we had set.

The interview style for all the focus groups was based on a qualitative interviewing technique, which involved a flexible outline of topics and questions (Patton, 2002). A prepared interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to help to guide the interviews. In the first part of the interview, the students mentioned which social media platforms they used, named the platforms where they had friended their teachers and described the reasoning and the initiative behind these relationships. The purpose of this part was to create an open and casual environment, to get the young used to the focus group and to direct their thoughts to the upcoming thematic blocks through simple questions.

As our participants mentioned Facebook as the primary platform where teacher-student interaction occurred, the second block of questions centred on students' perceptions of teacher's Facebook use, in particular teacher's content creation and self-presentation practices on the site. Furthermore, students also discussed what kind of content they considered to be appropriate and inappropriate for a teacher to disclose on social media.

The last block of questions set out to explore aspects related to teacher credibility. In short, we were interested in finding out how teacher self-disclosure on social media affected teacher credibility and teacher-student relationships in the school context. Furthermore, we set out to explore how student perceptions of their teachers had changed and developed after becoming friends with them on social media.

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the interviews, as this method provides an overview of the text being studied as a whole and focuses on the main and important meanings of the text, while also supporting hidden-line analysis (Kalmus, Masso, & Linno, 2015). In the first round of analysis, both authors used an inductive approach and highlighted parts of the text which captured key topics: 'reasons for 'friending' teachers on social media', 'main interaction topics', 'teacher self-presentation on social media', etc. were created to illustrate the main meanings derived from the text. After close readings and initial open coding, we discussed the key topics which had emerged. In the second round of analysis, theoretical and selective coding (Lonkila, 2004) was used to analyse the data gathered.

3.2.   Sample

Our strategic sample (N=45) consisted of 20 secondary school students (8 boys and 12 girls) and 25 primary school students (9 boys and 16 girls). The students came from different schools located in the cities of Tallinn, Tartu, and Rakvere and some more rural areas within the Harju County. The secondary school students were 16-18 years old (attending classes 10-12) and the primary school students were 13-16 years old (attending classes 7-9). All the students in our sample were daily social media users,

and they all had different experiences with interacting with their teachers on social media as they all had at least one (usually more) teacher amongst their social media "friends".

We combined convenience sampling with snowball sampling to find participants for our study. First, we decided to send emails to the general e-mail accounts of different schools in Estonia so that they would share the invite to participate in our study with their students. Such a method however, proved to be inefficient, as only two schools agreed to forward our interview requests. Then we decided to contact potential participants through Facebook and got in contact with personal acquaintances who matched the criteria for the study. Those young people who wanted to participate in the focus groups were encouraged to name friends who might also be interested in taking part in the study. In comparison to boys, slightly more girls volunteered to participate in the study. However, as we did not aim at assessing gender-based differences in the students' social media experiences, we were pleased to be able to discuss the topic with the most information-rich participants.

After the potential sample was formed, we prepared a consent letter informing the participants about the aims of the study, the methods of data collection and analysis, etc.; and the young were requested to get their parents to sign the forms. The consent forms were signed both by the parents of the underage participants and all the young participants themselves.

All but one of the nine interviews took place on school property, either in the school library, the youth centre, in a black-box studio or in some of the classrooms depending on the preference of the participants; one interview took place in a café. The interviews lasted 30-90 minutes each. All the focus group interviews were recorded and later transcribed, producing a total of 164 pages of data (on average, each focus group produced 18 pages of data).

4.   FINDINGS

4.1.   Teacher-student "friendship" and interaction on social media

Although the students participating in our interviews viewed teacher-student interactions on social media as a normal and quite common thing on multiple platforms, e.g. Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp, they believed such interactions mainly resulted from necessity. The students explained that social media platforms provided them with easy and quick ways to reach out to their teachers (and vice versa) in case there was a need to ask for additional information about home assignments, issues related to logistics or class organisation, as well as to discuss absences. In short, our focus groups revealed that teacher-student interactions on social media were focused on issues related to school and the interactions were triggered by concrete and often urgent needs that required quick responses. Only on a few occasions did our participants mention that they had "friended" their teachers just for fun or out of curiosity.

Our focus groups revealed that teacher-student "friendships" on social media where oftentimes initiated by the teachers, rather than the students. Our participants claimed that if their relationship with the teacher was positive and supportive, they had no objections to becoming "friends" on social media. However, if the student considered one's relationship with the teacher to be rocky, a "friend request" by the teacher was viewed in less favourable light and caused discomfort in the student.

[When a teacher sends you a "friend request", what kind of emotions does it trigger?]

Boy2: It depends on the teacher. I did not get along well with my previous class teacher and when she sent me a "follow" request on Instagram, it was quite unpleasant. I did not like her at all, and I did not want to have anything to do with her after graduating from primary school. But then again, one social studies teacher is really cool and uploads some funny photos and some weird comments. These are quite fun to follow. It depends on how good relations you have with a teacher. It's nice to have good relations with a teacher (Focus group 3_secondary school).

Relying on the experiences of our study participants we can claim that the teachers who were willing to connect with their students on social media usually tended to be younger and thus perhaps also more similar in their communication style. The above might also help to explain why "friending" such teachers on social media did not trigger any additional discomfort or negative feelings in students.

Although some of the participants in our study had used closed class or school discussion groups to interact with their teachers on social media, communicating through teachers' professional social media accounts was still rare. At the same time, it was evident that "friending" students through one's personal accounts had enabled students to gain access to the more private aspects leading to the blurring of boundaries between teachers' professional and personal lives.

4.2. Teachers' self-disclosure on social media

Our focus groups revealed that students were quite frequently lurking on the profiles of teachers. In fact, focus group interviews with primary school students suggested that lurking on one's teachers' profiles had become quite a routine practice for the young and was even considered mandatory when new teacher came to school or when a student changed schools. In particular, the students were intrigued to find out more about their teachers' personal lives, e.g. about their families, hobbies, the kind of memes they shared, the kind of news they read, the kind of pages they followed and the groups and communities they were involved in. Students' experiences revealed that oftentimes their teachers were quite active in sharing bits and pieces of their private lives, especially photos of different family and work-related events, or

their hobbies as well as selfies. All these posts provided the students with additional information about their teachers they had not learnt through their interactions in school.

Our focus groups with primary school students indicated that students had developed quite a clear standard regarding what kind of information was appropriate for a teacher to disclose on social media and what not. Furthermore, younger participants of our focus groups also believed that such inappropriate sharing could start to affect teacher's credibility in the eyes of the students.

> **Boy 14**: If a teacher has photos where they are smoking or something like that then this might start to change students' opinions of the teacher (Focus group 1_primary school).

All in all, we were able to identify four main types of content that the students considered to be inappropriate for a teacher to post on social media. Firstly, our participants believed that teachers should not share photos representing activities that could set a questionable example for students, e.g. drinking alcohol, smoking, or posing in revealing clothing. Secondly, students considered posts which would reflect poorly on teachers' professional judgement to be inappropriate. For example, students in our focus groups also believed that teachers should avoid making comments that are political, racial, or religious in nature. Furthermore, they also believed that sharing detailed information about one's personal life on social media was also inappropriate.

> **Girl 4**: Or something personal about one's… I don't know… Girl 5:"I broke up with my husband" or something (Focus group 2_secondary school).

Thirdly, students stated that posts which focussed inappropriate attention on one's students or colleagues should also be avoided on social media. In short, students in our sample were not only against teachers mocking, belittling, or harassing students on social media, but also looked down upon the (inter)actions of those teachers who were carefully monitoring and reacting on students' social media usage.

> **Boy 2**: Well, if she writes to her students at 3AM and asks why they are still up and online on Facebook and they should go to sleep and… (Focus group 3_secondary school).

Our focus groups suggest that in comparison to primary school students, secondary school students were more understanding and open about teacher disclosures on social media. Although the secondary school students in our sample emphasised that teachers, just like all adults, should only post such content on social media that was

in accordance with the overall netiquette and behaviour standards, they believed that it was not fair to hold teachers to higher standards of professionalism.

> **Girl 1**: I think that it's every person's own choice; if you're a teacher, there shouldn't be any prohibitions about what not to post. **Girl 2**: The teacher should not be in a box: "you are a teacher, and therefore you cannot do this or that". **Boy 3**: Just follow common behavioural standards. Boy 1: There are some things that one [the teacher] shouldn't do in public, because they are like a role model. **Boy 3**: This is every adult's responsibility to represent oneself. **Girl 2**: Yes, I also do not think that it is only expected from teachers. *(Focus group 1_secondary school).*

4.3. The impact of social media self-disclosure on teacher credibility

Our focus groups revealed only three instances when teacher self-disclosure and interactions on social media had led to student evaluations that were consciously negative. The first two instances were related to the general annoyance the students felt when noticing the teachers engaged in caring dataveillance. Students' descriptions of those two cases reveal that the students considered their privacy to be fringed upon and believed it was not the right place, time nor teachers' duty to take any action. In the third case, negative student evaluations were triggered by the fact that the student considered the nature of the teachers' posts to be inconsistent with her character and behaviour in school.

> **Girl 5**: If, during a lesson, you start thinking about the photos or selfies and the captions she uploads, then you think, like, okay then. This doesn't make me think really positively of her, when you see these photos. Moderator: What kind of photos were they? **Girl 4**: Different selfies, well basically selfies, which had a negative effect. Girl 1: Leaves this kind of impression that she takes a photo of herself when she has made herself look really good and tries to be, like, really sexy on social media. **Girl 4**: Trying to be someone else, like, she doesn't act accordingly.
> *(Focus-group 2_secondary school).*

 Despite the above instances, all the students in our sample believed that teacher-student interactions on social media have had positive effects on teacher-student relations and their classroom climate.

> **Girl 2**: Maybe yes, if you have social media contact, then you also have more contact in school, and this makes you feel connected and closer. You know more about the person and have the courage to approach them. **Girl 3**: I think that thanks to social media, the image of the teacher as being just

a teacher is fading and students realise that they also have private lives, and they are also individuals. **Girl 2**: It kind of brings them to the same level as us. **Girl** 1: We see that the teacher is not a higher being whom we must worship.
(Focus group 3_secondary school).

As indicated in the extract above, students believed that teacher-student interactions on social media have enabled them to gain a closer and more personal look into the lives of teachers outside of school hours and brought them closer to the students. Thus, having access to each other on more informal communication platforms has enabled to relieve the pressures students otherwise oftentimes felt when interacting with their teachers in schools.

5.   DISCUSSION

The aim of this article was to study Estonian primary and secondary school students' opinions and experiences with teacher-student interactions on social media providing thus voice to the students whose views on the topic have only rarely been explored.

The findings of our nine focus groups with 13-18-year-old students (N=45) indicate that teacher-student interactions on social media have become commonplace. However, not every student or teacher is interested in forming such "friendships". Rather, as also pointed out by Forkosh-Baruch, Hershkovitz, and Ang (2015), interactions on social media tend to support those teacher-student relationships that are formed upon well-functioning face-to-face relationships. In fact, the experiences of the students in our sample reveal that younger teachers are more likely to engage in social media communication with their students as they tend to appreciate similar style of communication. In short, mutual appreciation of social media tends to be built upon sharing similar generational understandings and backgrounds.

Shared generational consciousness about the affordances of social media can also be visible in the fact that such teacher-student interactions were mainly in line with previous research (e.g. Hart & Steinbrecher, 2011; Draskovic et al., 2013; Gunnulfsen, 2016), the experiences of our participants revealed that both teachers and students appreciate the quick and easy communication opportunity social media platforms offer for micro-managing their daily errands and exchanging school related information. Contrary to Techlehaimanot and Hickman (2011) who claimed that the initiation of social media "friendships" should come from students, our findings indicate that teachers are also prone to initiate the contact with students if there are concrete school-related issues that need students' immediate reactions.

Most of such exchanges however were carried out via teachers' personal social media accounts. Thus, even though different social media guidelines for teachers strongly advise against "friending" students through personal accounts (Graham et

al., 2018), only a few students in our sample had used closed class or school discussion groups or had interacted through a teachers' "professional account". Our findings thus reaffirm the understanding that the blurring of boundaries between teacher's personal and professional lives, as noted by Asterhan and Rosenberg (2015), is unavoidable.

Our focus-groups also revealed that students had become "nightmare readers" (Marwich & boyd, 2010) on their teachers' social media profiles. Our participants believed that young people engage in such monitoring mainly in the hopes of finding additional information about the personal lives, hobbies, and interests of their teachers. In comparison to the previous views suggesting that teachers should always be held to higher standards of professionalism (cf. Lumpkin, 2008), secondary school students in our sample were much more at ease. At the same time, they still had concrete opinions about the things teachers should not be sharing on social media. For example, consistent with the findings of Nemetz (2012), our participants believed that teachers should avoid making comments of political, racial or religious nature, as well as mock, belittle and harass one's students on social media (cf. Devic & Kolburan, 2015). In short, students warned teachers against disclosing information that could later potentially lead to role-, face-, and stigma risks, as identified by Hosek and Thompson (2009). Furthermore, students in our sample shared the views previously expressed by Mazer et al. (2007), when stating that teachers' self-disclosure on social media should be consistent with their teaching style and the general character they present in the classroom. The findings of the present study thus contribute additional evidence to suggest how crucial it is that teachers develop and accommodate their own privacy boundaries (Petronio, 2002) when disclosing information about themselves on social media to find a healthy balance between representing themselves as professionals and as human beings with personal lives, hobbies, and interests outside the workplace (Atay, 2009).

It is noteworthy that a common view shared amongst our participants was that teacher-student interactions on social media have positive effect on the overall teacher-student relationships. For example, students in our sample claimed that such social media "friendships" have had a positive effect on their class climate as social media has enabled them to form warmer, and friendlier relationships with their teachers. Furthermore, students believed that interacting with one's teachers on social media provided them with a unique opportunity to see teachers as individuals rather than mere professionals standing in front of the class. In summary, our findings provide important evidence to illustrate that social media could be used to much greater extent for building more meaningful relationships between teachers and students, especially at the times of the COVID-19 pandemic when face-to-face communication is scarce.

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